

**Congressional Field Hearing
Homeland Security Subcommittee on Emergency
Preparedness and Science and Technology
April 12, 2006
Orting, Washington**

This field hearing was chaired by Congressman Dave Reichert, Eighth District, and he was joined by Congressman Bill Pascrell, Jr., Eighth District, New Jersey, Ranking Democratic Committee Member. Eric Holdeman, Director King County Office of Emergency Management attended this hearing and took the notes below. These are not a complete record of all the conversation and testimony that was provided. Since this was an official hearing, a full and complete record will be provided in about two weeks as part of the congressional/committee record.

The opening remarks by Congressman Reichert centered on the need for bi-partisan committee work to fix the problems that exist throughout the nation. This hearing is intended to help shape future legislation that will be proposed to improve how the American people are protected in the future.

Congressman Pascrell noted that disaster preparedness is a bottom up approach. He noted that homeland security must start in our homes and local communities and that this area of the Northwest has many vulnerabilities due to natural hazards and from terrorism. Pascrell added that we need to overcome turf wars that exist at all levels of government and wanted to know what are the greatest impediments to local officials. The proposed administration's Fiscal Year 2007 Budget cuts to disaster preparedness and law enforcement are not seen as being beneficial in his opinion.

Testimony was provided by:

George Foresman, Undersecretary for Preparedness, Department of Homeland Security:

Mr. Foresman emphasized the importance of a *national* and not just a federal approach to preparedness. He intends to integrate preparedness for natural disasters and terrorist attacks. He is looking to improve the synchronization between the levels of government and among federal agencies. There is being proposed a National Preparedness Improvement Program (NPIP) which is a \$50M effort to improve preparedness across all levels of government and also the private sector.

Mr. Foresman also noted that we need to have “one” system for all-hazards and an integrated planning and response system.

Reichert: Where should FEMA be and why? Should it be a separate agency?

Moving FEMA to a separate agency is a horrible idea. Their problems are in management and leadership not in structure. You need good quality, experienced and educated staff. FEMA is not the only element in preparedness. We are making significant progress in strengthening FEMA and we meet with them on a weekly basis. Great progress has been made in just the last 30 days. FEMA is getting assistance from the rest of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). There may be some tweaks needed to the FEMA structure that the new FEMA Director should be allowed to make. We have had growth pains, but we are continuing to strengthen ourselves.

Pascrell: Chertoff has said there will be changes. I hope they are not just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. What is the most important thing is for FEMA to be functional and that there be a seat for them in the Oval Office. An increased role for the military is one of the things also being recommended. What is that all about?

DHS will always include the FEMA Director in working with the White House. A more robust role for the military has been recommended by some of the Katrina after action reports. Having the military involved is not a substituted for good programs at the local level. We need to be prepared to have the mission assignments ready in advance of a disaster to make sure we can get the pre-work done and pre-scripted before a disaster happens. Mullen added. Disasters should not be federalized. Any federal troops that are brought to bear should be under the direction of the state’s National Guard. Foresman added, there is no intent to federalize a response. We just want the federal response to be as robust as possible.

Pascrell: Upgrading the National Alert System. What does that mean?

The Emergency Alert System (EAS) has not undergone the transformation that is needed to make use of modern technology. There are jurisdictions and states where there are weak links in the System that need to be fixed. We need to work with state and regional partners.

Pascrell: There has been a grant tracking system pitched to congress. What is the status of that program?

The grant tracking system has not been fielded yet. We are looking to adopt a working product. We want to make the grant processes as streamlined as possible.

Jim Mullen, Director Washington State Emergency Management Division:

Washington State has been using an all-hazards approach. Regional federal colleagues are respected but appear to have been cut out of the dialog with their federal headquarters. Solutions are complex and costly. Interoperability is an important element of our strategy. The current mix of federal to state/local grant funds is an 80/20. DHS staff still lacks emergency management experience and their deadlines are unrealistic. The Katrina experience is just a continued degradation of our national preparedness. He then listed the significant natural hazards we face both tsunami and earthquake. We need continued Emergency Management Program Grant (EMPG) funding that reflects a partnership. State and locals will carry our share of the burden. True consultation means that there is a meaningful debate and not DHS just going through the motions to “show” coordination.

Reichert: You mentioned some challenges now with working with FEMA and the grant application process?

He believes that reversing the establishment of DHS was done without adequate thought. We should not deconstruct it now and instead wait for a new administration, no matter what the party is. Let's work with the new, and better team that is in place. We need some continuity in staff at DHS. We need FEMA to better coordinate the federal partners and pull them together. We have done what they asked us to do in working together. We need the federal agencies to also work together. We need stability in the grant processes so we know what to expect. We don't have time for another reorganization.

Pascrell: Are tribal included in the Emergency Management Council?

Tribes are not on the Council, but are invited to the terrorism committee work. Changes to the Emergency Management Council (EMC) are being considered.

Steve Bailey, Director, Pierce County Emergency Management:

Pierce County formed a Terrorism Early Warning Task Force shortly after the 9/11 Attacks. The HLS grants have made a significant improvement in Pierce County's overall public safety preparedness. Several recent drills show that these improvements have been made. We need resources to continue to make more improvements. Communications interoperability has been an area of emphasis. The purchase of a Communications Vehicle has been a great addition. Community involvement and their expectations are for immediate response from public agencies. Today first responders are already overloaded in trying to respond to daily emergencies they are facing. They are emphasizing neighborhood preparedness with a program called Pierce County Neighborhood Emergency Teams (PC-NET). A federal program got this started, but now without continued federal funding they have 50 neighborhoods on a waiting list to

get trained. They are integrating crime prevention into to their disaster preparedness efforts with neighborhoods. Their performance measurement is that they have seen a 27% decrease in crime in those areas that are part of PC-NET.

Pascrell: What are the standards derived from for the purchase of equipment?

The state has established subcommittees that have included local representation. All equipment purchases are vetted to ensure that there is standardization. Federal standards are probably a good idea, but there needs to be some flexibility for local agencies. Also, the tribes are well represented at the local level.

Mario Trevino, Fire Chief, City of Bellevue:

Spoke on the City of Bellevue which provides support to over 100,000 people. He shared that he is Chair of the Region 1 Zone Fire Chiefs. We have a collaborative regional effort in King County on emergency management. There have been numerous regional efforts through the use of HLS funds for first responders both fire and police. There are joint training efforts that are multi-jurisdictional and multi-discipline. There is an Urban Area Strategy that was developed in 2004. It is multi-county. It is integrated with the SHSP grants that are provided separately. Some of our recent challenges has been trying to keep up for the changing federal grant criteria. We must be provided time for a regional process. Dramatic changes in federal processes provides for an inefficient use of time and resources. We need more flexibility in the use of funds to include critical infrastructure protection along with other priorities. The national response plan needs us to better integrate our activities. We need to continue to improve our mutual aid capability and enhance our regional planning.

Pascrell: Have the new grant guidelines helped?

The guidelines keep changing.

Bill Mitzel, Risk Control Specialist, Unigard Insurance Group:

Unigard started their program beginning in 1997. They received technical assistance from Bellevue Emergency Management. These efforts have paid off during numerous local and regional events. Risk and emergency management are integrated within the company. A modified CERT program is used within the company. This program is a 4-5 hour effort. Their primary focus of their program is on life safety. Their primary concern is for a catastrophic earthquake. They also provide consultation for their business lines of insurance and to provide best practices. Credit should be given to companies who invest in business continuity and emergency preparedness.

Pascrell: How do you balance your business needs and emergency preparedness?

Unigard comes in and assists their partners with planning.

Reichert: How does your CERT program differ?

We use a segment of the CERT, versus trying to do everything, customizing it to fit our organization. This is tied to how much employee time can be given up to support this.

Reichert: How is there interoperability between Bellevue and Unigard?

They have a HAM radio operators who interface with the city. The combined communications center in Bellevue also provides regional support to the East Side.

Reichert: How does the UASI project review work?

The State reviews the UASI review. Mullen chimed in, how the UASI Core Group works and who the members are. The spirit of the group is toward regional action. Bailey added, Public Safety aviation is a great need in this region. There are limited assets in existence and it is a significant work element and project within the FFY06 grant request.

Closing remarks: We need a good working relationship between the levels of government. A second panel will be called.

Second Panel of experts:

Sheriff Paul Pastor, Pierce County: There have been numerous highlights already presented. I'd like to highlight some needs. We don't have a fully interoperable communications system. It is "patched" via our Emergency Management Division's good work. We are taking an all-hazards approach. We have a significant involvement of our citizens in everything we do. We have more to do. We are advocates for local control, but doing so also complicates our regional response efforts. There is a state-wide law enforcement mobilization plan. We need a stronger more permanent interoperability communications system. They are issuing an RFP for a study of their issues. The proper role for the federal level is in question. We have a co-responsibility. We are asking federal agencies to partner with us. Cutting funding for law enforcement is not wise at this point.

[It was at this point that I had to depart the hearing for other appointments].